

THE INDIANAPOLIS STAR

Indy: diverse, but still divided

We need to stop just talking and start working to ease racial tension that simmers beneath the surface

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Indianapolis had a defining moment on race relations 43 years ago, a moment not of violence but of peace.

"We can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did," Robert F. Kennedy said on April 4, 1968, "to understand and to comprehend, and to replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand with compassion and love."

Kennedy's words to a crowd in Indianapolis helped us to avoid the race riots that erupted in more than 100 other U.S. cities the day King was killed. His words also inspired a new generation of local black political leaders.

Those are indeed things to celebrate. And every year, as we did this year, we remember what was said and reflect upon on what we avoided.

But perhaps it's time to do more than that. Perhaps, in our efforts to follow what King and Kennedy would've wanted, to address our differences with words instead of violence, we've become a city that settles for talk and avoids action when it comes to race relations. A city that, in our quest not to offend one another, talks around issues of race but doesn't talk about them head-on.

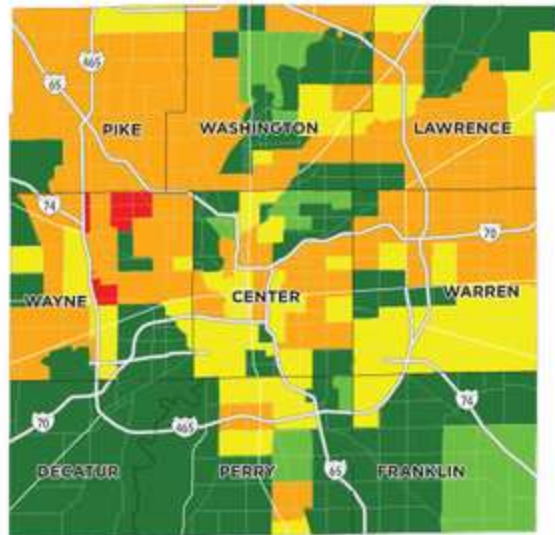
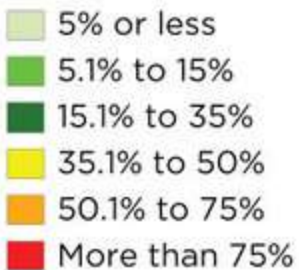
"By our very nature, people in Indianapolis are polite," said Tim Nation, co-founder and executive director of the Peace Learning Center. "We're told not to talk about politics and religion -- and especially, don't talk about race."

And yet, the issue of race is always there.

Tensions between blacks and whites -- and now blacks, whites and Hispanics and a growing population of folks from other continents -- constantly bubble below the surface. It's part of the fabric of our community.

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Source: Census Bureau

The Star

Occasionally, the tensions threaten to erupt. Stressors, such as clashes with police, usually are the cause. But almost always, residents and community leaders rush to restore calm, often without addressing the underlying issues.

Other cities, such as Cincinnati, haven't been as lucky. They've had racial tensions turn into full-scale riots.

Can Indianapolis avoid a major clash forever? Will it take a crisis for us to address long-standing racial tensions? Do we care enough to do the difficult, unsettling work necessary to finally confront long-standing problems?

These are questions we need to ask ourselves as we move toward becoming a truly diverse and inclusive city. Doing so -- and not just saying that we're doing it -- is critical if we want to continue to be a place where people want to live, work and visit as the population continues to diversify. It's one of the most significant challenges we must face to make Indianapolis the best city it can be.

But it's still our choice.

"A community chooses how it wants to develop," said Wilma Moore, senior archivist of African-American history at the Indiana Historical Society. "Until people look it squarely in the eye, things will stay the same."

How we got here

In many ways, Indianapolis isn't much different from other cities in the Midwest.

For decades, blacks and whites were segregated.

School desegregation finally ended after two federal court orders -- the first integrating Indianapolis Public Schools and the second leading to the busing of black students to suburban Marion County schools -- were handed down in the 1960s and 1970s.

A concerted effort to keep blacks from living in certain areas of the city, such as north of 38th Street, lasted into the 1970s as well.

"When blacks moved into neighborhoods," Moore said, "for-sale signs would go up all over the neighborhood."

As a result, areas of Indianapolis developed along lines of segregation. And unlike in many other Midwestern cities, those patterns remain and aren't questioned.

The Southside, for example, is still one of the least-diverse areas of the city, according to census data.

In most of Decatur, Perry and Franklin townships, more than 75 percent of the population is white, and the chance of living near someone of a different race or ethnicity is 35 percent or less, according to a statistical analysis of census data.

"I know growing up, we never went south of Washington Street," Moore said. "That's just the way it was."

Regina Marsh, executive director of the Forest Manor Multiservice Center, recounted a similar experience after she moved here from Los Angeles in 1991.

"My grandmother told me not to go down on the Southside," she said.

People told me the same thing when I moved here in 2005. From time to time, I've even found myself repeating that mantra to newcomers of color.

Why is that?

Ask many Hoosiers, as I have, and they'll shrug and say they don't really know.

Moore suggests it might have started out as a perception that became a reputation that became a stereotype. Whether or not the original perception was true, she doesn't know. Neither do others - or at least they're not saying.

What is clear is that stereotypes are powerful.

Only in the past 20 years has the population on the Southside become more diverse, and most of the diversity is in Perry Township.

The Northside of Indianapolis started to desegregate decades earlier. And now more blacks live in suburban Marion County townships than in Center Township, which historically has been African-Americans' home.

Still, there are only a handful of neighborhoods in all of Indianapolis where your likelihood of living near someone of a different race or ethnicity is higher than 75 percent, and all of those areas are in Wayne Township.

We aren't the most segregated city in the country. Detroit has that distinction, according to a new report, "The Persistence of Segregation in the Metropolis," by Brown University's John Logan and Florida State University's Brian Stults.

But unlike the nation's most segregated cities, there are few things in Indianapolis that actually force us to integrate on a daily basis. There's no mass transit system, for example, that's used equally by people of all races and all income levels.

So when we talk about creating a city that's truly inclusive, where does this leave us? How can we say we're welcoming to people of different races and ethnicities if our city is still segregated in some respects?

Recent uproars

When it comes to race relations in Indianapolis, Nation says what scares him the most is ignorance.

Hoosiers, he says, feel like they can't talk about their differences. So when a crisis arises, people make assumptions based on stereotypes in the absence of factual information.

Rhetoric can quickly get out of hand.

Take the case of Brandon Johnson.

Last May, Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department officers arrested the biracial teenager for trying to "instigate" a crowd at an Eastside subdivision. Police were there to arrest his brother.

Johnson said he was severely beaten, and images of his badly bruised face soon surfaced in the local media. Shortly after that, the Rev. Al Sharpton, a national activist, held a rally calling for the dismissal of all five of the police officers involved in the incident.

Many blacks thought the case was merely the latest example of police misconduct or, at least, insensitivity to the black community. Many whites, in contrast, saw it as an isolated incident in which Johnson wouldn't have been injured if he had stayed out of the officers' way.

Although the police chief and public safety director recommended that one officer involved in the incident be fired, the Civilian Police Merit Board cleared him, and ultimately none of the officers involved was dismissed.

A similar fervor erupted in 1987, after police said black teen Michael Taylor shot himself in the head while he was handcuffed in the backseat of a police car. Hundreds marched around the City-County Building in protest.

The two officers who searched Taylor after his arrest for attempting to steal a car were each suspended for a day without pay.

There have been other, less serious incidents over the years. Most recently, plans to erect a statue of a freed slave near the City-County Building sparked heated words about the promotion of racism.

Even our community celebrations often leave us divided along racial lines, if unintentionally. Major events such as Indiana Black Expo and the Circle City Classic attract many blacks but few whites. The reverse is true of the Indianapolis 500 and the Brickyard 400.

Moving forward

How do we become a city that's not merely diverse, but integrated?

First, we need to be willing to have uncomfortable discussions.

"Racism is alive and well in Indianapolis," Marsh said. "There are still restaurants that will ask for ID and places where I'm followed around a store."

What's more, racism doesn't involve just blacks and whites. As Indianapolis becomes more of a global city, there are growing tensions between blacks and Hispanics, whites and Hispanics, and among other ethnic groups.

"Bigotry is bigotry, whoever is perpetrating it," said Mark Russell, who is the director of education, family services and housing for the Indianapolis Urban League but was not speaking on behalf of the organization.

The tensions haven't gone unnoticed among city leaders.

Several organizations meet regularly to address race relations. One of them, the Race and Cultural Relations Leadership Network, has for years organized "study circles," in which small groups of residents discuss discrimination in their lives and ways to deal with it.

The Peace Learning Center also works with companies and schools to teach people how to address their differences and respect their common bonds.

"We're always conscientious of what are the racial tensions in our community," said Jane Gehlhausen, director of international and cultural affairs for the city of Indianapolis.

In some ways, what Indianapolis is doing mirrors efforts in Cincinnati. Ten years ago, a police officer in that Ohio city shot an unarmed black man. Race riots erupted and brought the city to a halt.

A new report from Better Together Cincinnati found that progress has been made on closing the gap of understanding between blacks and whites. But a lack of steady leadership has hampered those efforts because often, race relations is an issue that still comes up only when there's a crisis.

Russell sees the same thing happening in Indianapolis. Plenty of groups meet to discuss race relations, but few of them talk to one another to coordinate any large-scale solutions.

"We're really good at talking and meeting, but not so good at following up and acting." Plus, he said, "we give a lot of credence to the idea of not upsetting other folks."

Making progress will require upsetting some people. It will require questioning some of our long-held stereotypes. And above all, it will require facing the truth.

"Martin Luther King offended people because he spoke the truth," Russell said. "The truth does hurt some people."